

Children of the Forest

By Julia Rheihis

For my parents, hiking was second nature. Rivers were their highways. Boulders were their aunts and uncles, birds their brothers, mountains their grandparents, and the lakes glassy pools in which fish, like genes, mingled to connect the natural family.

The soil beneath their steady feet was their home, the sturdy foundation of the family. From this soil sprung the children, and from these children, generations grew. They grew tall and wide, towering over my parents. Never once did their needles harm them; in fact, they created a piney canopy of shade for every human that passed.

Soon after I came into the world, my parents brought me before their family. They were happy to share the beauty of their family with me, as any proud couple would be.

First I met the grandparents, old mountains careening over us as we approached. Calm and caring, they gladly accepted me. The rest of the family followed suit.

My aunts and uncles offered me a playground in their rocky masses, and pleasure in watching the chipmunks weave in and out of the cracks. My brothers swarmed around me, spreading their wide wings out in protection.

But—and perhaps because I was a child myself—I had not yet acknowledged the children. They made me cold in the shade. Their needles landed in my hair. If I tried to embrace one, its sticky sap left messes on my hands.

So I left them alone, craving the alpine.

It wasn't until I was alone that I befriended one of the children. I was quite a bit older now, and, frankly, the family bored me. It seemed it was not *my* family, but one that my parents had forced upon me.

I wandered over logs and pine needles, away from our campsite, kicking at stones and sticks and pinecones. Tired, I sat on a root extruding from the ground.

I realized it was the foot of one of nature's children. *How old*, I wondered, *must it be?* I imagined it stretched above me like a never-ending ladder to the sky.

I looked up and saw nothing. I looked behind me. A stump. Someone had killed the child. A pang of sorrow clenched my stomach. I approached the remains and hesitantly examined them, feeling as if I was invading nature's privacy.

I gently fingered the rings of the corpse. And then, mourning my fallen kin, I began to understand: each ring lived over the life of the one underneath.

I extended my arms, examining my skin. I closed my eyes, breathed in, and felt my own layers. Buried deep inside was my center. The air entered it with a soft tickle. I laughed. A childish laugh.

Each tree was not a child after all. Each tree was, as I am, in the process of life. Each layer is another year, another stage.

At that moment, my center burned with love, and the children within the trees loved me back with the love only my family can understand.